Headline: **Magical Evening Under the Stars**

By Torney Van Acker

The Rappahannock County Park kicked off its long-awaited 2020 dark sky event season last Saturday, July 18, with a picture-perfect summer evening under the stars. The scorching heat of the day yielded to balmy temperatures with a light breeze. Jointly sponsored by the Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection (RLEP) and the Rappahannock County Recreational Facilities Authority (RCRFA), the well-attended event featured two presentations followed by observations of the night skies with binoculars and telescopes.

The first presentation described five key principles in the design of responsible outdoor lighting and promoted RLEP’s free outdoor light replacement program. The second presentation, delivered by James Granahan from the Northern Virginia Astronomy Club (NOVAC), whetted the public’s appetite for the various celestial objects that would be seen in the sky later that evening once the twilight faded. A half dozen telescopes set up earlier by volunteers were poised to bring these objects into closer view.

Once the presentations were over, visitors resorted to their picnic blankets and lawn chairs (appropriately distanced), most facing northwest to await the appearance of comet NEOWISE. A hush fell over the crowd as one star after another materialized in the dimming light. Being the height of summer, twilight took its time to fade, but by 9:45 pm, the comet gradually emerged into view, its nucleus forming the top of a triangle with two stars. Its tail streamed upward toward the Big Dipper, spanning more than ten moon diameters. An unforgettable sight, especially with binoculars or through a telescope! For many, this was their first-ever comet viewing. (This comet returns in 6766 years!). A few clouds obscured the view for a short time, but it returned in all its grandeur as the twilight dimmed.

Toward 10:00 pm, the planets Jupiter and Saturn rose above the trees to the south. Those with binoculars were rewarded with seeing four moons of Jupiter, the Red Spot and the splendid rings of Saturn. Later when the skies became truly dark, the Milky Way appeared as a luminous band of dust stretching across the sky between the northern and southern horizons. With binoculars, the Milky Way became transformed into a sparkling tapestry studded with millions of diamond-like stars. For some of the visitors, it was the first time they had ever seen the Milky Way in person.

Rappahannock County Park received a Silver Tier Dark Sky Park designation from the International Dark Sky Association (IDA) in February 2019. It is the third Park in Virginia to earn that distinction and the third county park in the United States. The next Dark Sky event at the Park is planned for Saturday, August 22 starting at 8 pm.